The Literary Design of Luke's Gospel

Reading the Gospel According to Luke

Prologue - Luke 1:1-4
Introduction - Luke 1:5-2:51: John and Jesus Introduced
Part 1 - Luke 3:1-9:50: Jesus Announces God's Kingdom in Galilee

- Chapter 3: Jesus is introduced as the Son of God and Son of Adam
- Chapter 4: Jesus inaugurates his Kingdom mission
- Chapters 5-6: Jesus confronts Israel's leaders and teaches about the Kingdom
- Chapters 7-9: Jesus' healings and parables of the Kingdom

Part 2 - Luke 9:51-19:27: Jesus' Journey to Jerusalem

- Chapter 9:51-13:21: The journey part 1: Following Jesus 101
- Chapter 13:22-17:10: The journey part 2: God's generous and dangerous offer of the Kingdom
- Chapter 17:11-19:27: The journey part 3: Jesus' coming Kingdom

Part 3 - Luke 19:28-24:53: Jesus' Confrontation, Execution, and Resurrection in Jerusalem

- Chapter 19:28-21: Jesus confronts Jerusalem's leaders during Passover week
- Chapter 22-23: Jesus' last Passover, arrest, and execution
- Chapter 24: The empty tomb and resurrection appearances

The Unity of Luke-Acts

Luke 1:1-4 and Acts 1:1-2 show that both books were written by the same author and were meant to be read as a single continuous work.

Luke 1:1-4 shows that the Gospel of Luke was compiled from sources and eyewitness reports of events to help followers of Jesus understand his significance and story with more certainty.

The Old Testament in Luke-Acts

> Luke sees the Old Testament not merely as a collection of predictions about a future Messiah, but rather as a book of self-involving promises made by God to the people of Israel. Through his covenant promise, God has bound himself to this particular people and can therefore be trusted to fulfill his word. Luke's claim is that this is precisely what has happened in the life of Jesus and in the continuing history of the people that follow him as their Lord.
>
> Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*, 192-93

Patterns in Luke's Engagement with the Old Testament

1. Scripture quotations are almost always found in the mouths of characters in the story and not in overt authorial commentary. This narrative device imparts a dramatic nature to Luke's intertextual citations. Readers are required to interpret the echoes of the Hebrew Bible in light of the narrative's unfolding plot.
2. Most of the references to the Hebrew Bible consist of narrative parallels that are suggested through the literary devices of allusion and echo. The effect of this narrative technique is to lure us into the work of close and careful reading, seeking to discern and interpret the intertextual clues woven into the fabric of the story.

Illustration: "Luke is like a dramatic theatrical performance, where the primary action of the Gospel is played out on center stage, in front of the spotlights. On a scrim at the back of the stage, however, there is displayed a kaleidoscopic series of flickering sepia-toned images from Israel's Scriptures. The image can flash by almost unnoticed; however, if the viewer pays careful attention, there are many moments where the words or gestures of the characters onstage mirror something on the shifting backdrop, or, possibly, the other way around. In these moments, the reader is expected to have a flash of interpretive insight, as the 'live action' recapitulates a scene from an older story, allowing the two narrative moments to interpret each other. It is not Luke' style to develop sustained sequences in which the patterns run parallel; rather, almost as soon as we recognize an echo of the Old Testament, the moment has passed and a new image appears on the backdrop ... The story keeps moving, and leaves us with a powerful but indistinct sense of analogy between God's saving acts for Israel in the past and the new liberating events coming to fulfillment in the story of Jesus."

Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Gospels*

Main Themes in Luke

The first theme appears in Luke chapters 1-2. Jesus' birth story is part of a larger pattern of God fulfilling his promises to individuals who represent the story of Israel.

Character	Promise	OT Portrait	Fulfillment	Poem of Celebration
The Temple: Zechariah	Elderly couple will bear a promised son (Luke 1:13-20).	Abraham and Sarai	Pregnancy (1:24) and birth (1:57)	Zechariah's Song (1:68-79)
The Poor: Mary	A woman of low status will bear the promised deliverer (Luke 1:31-33).	Hannah	Birth of Jesus (2:6-7)	Mary's Song (1:47-55)
The Prophets: Simeon and Anna	God promised that they would see the Messiah born in their day (Luke 2:25-26, 36-37).	Isaiah and Hannah	They see Jesus in the temple (2:26-27)	Simeon's Song (2:29-32) and Anna's praise (2:38)

These representative characters show how God is at work fulfilling his ancient covenant promises to Israel, and they set up the rest of Luke's account as one large fulfillment narrative.

Luke has designed the introductory section to focus on the interweaving of John and Jesus' story as the continuation of Israel's story.

Design Sequence	Episode Narrative Perspective		
Frame	1:5 "In the days of King Herod of Judah ..."		
A	1:5-7	Introduction to John's parents Zechariah and Elizabeth	Narrator
B	1:8-20	Annunciation of John's birth to Zechariah + poem	Zechariah
C	1:21-23	People's response to Zechariah's vision	People around Zechariah
D	1:24-25	Elizabeth becomes pregnant with John	Elizabeth
E	1:26-38	Annunciation of Jesus' birth to Mary + poem	Mary
F	1:39-45	Mary meets Elizabeth, Elizabeth declared Mary to be the blessed one	Mary and Elizabeth
E	1:46-56	Celebration of Mary's pregnancy + poem	Mary
D	1:57-58	Elizabeth gives birth to John	Elizabeth
C	1:59-66	People's response to Zechariah's naming of John	People around Zechariah
B	1:67-79	Zechariah celebrates the birth of John + poem	Zechariah
A	1:80	Conclusion to John's youth	Narrator
Frame	2:1 "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus ..."		

The second main theme centers around Mary, Jesus' mother. Luke's depiction of Mary is crucially important for introducing the themes he will develop throughout the two volumes. Mary's portrait is a combination of two narrative traditions from the Hebrew Scriptures: (1) the deliverer of God's people (male or female), and (2) the miraculous mother of a male deliverer.

1. **The Male or Female Deliverer**

Female deliverers include the midwives Shiphrah and Puah (Exod. 2:15-21), Deborah (Judg. 4-5), Jael (Judg. 4:17-22; 5:24-27), and Esther.

Male deliverers include Joseph, Moses, the judges, Samuel, and David.

Mary and Other Deliverer Figures

Luke 1:28 - Angel to Mary *"Rejoice, O graced one! The Lord is with you."*	Judges 6:12 - Angel to Gideon *"The Lord is with you, O valiant one!"*
Luke 1:29-30 - Angel to Mary *Mary was disturbed at this word, and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. And the angel said, "Don't be afraid, Mary!"*	Judges 6:22-23 - Angel to Gideon *When Gideon saw that it was the angel of Yahweh, he said, "Oh no! I've seen the angel of Yahweh face to face!" But Yahweh said to him, "Peace! Don't be afraid!"*
Luke 1:35 - Angel to Mary *"The Holy Spirit will come upon you."*	Holy Spirit empowerment commonly describes the male judges. Othniel: Judges 3:9-10 - Gideon: Judges 6:34 Jephthah: Judges 11:29 - Samson: Judges 13:25 Deborah is described in a parallel role, and is the only judge who is also called "a prophet" (Judg. 5:4).
Luke 1:42 - Elizabeth to Mary *"You are blessed* (ευλογομενη) *among women."*	Judges 5:24 - Deborah of Jael *"Most blessed* (Sept. ευλογηθειη) *among women."*

2. Miraculous Mothers of Male Deliverers

Mothers of male deliverers include Sarah (Gen. 17-18, 21), Rebekah (Gen. 25:21), Leah and Rachel (Gen. 29:31-30:24), Samson's mother (Judg. 13), and Hannah (1 Sam. 1-2).

Mary and Other Mothers of Male Deliverers

Luke 1:31 - Angel to Mary: *"You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will call his name ..."*	Genesis 16:11 - Angel to Hagar: *"You are now pregnant and will give birth to a son, and you will call his name, Ishmael."* Judges 13:5 - Angel to Samson's mother: *"You will become pregnant and give birth to a son."* Isaiah 7:14 - Isaiah to Ahaz: *"The young woman will conceive and will give birth to a son, and she will call his name, Immanuel."*
Luke 1:32-33 - Angel to Mary: *"He will be great and called Son of the Most High ... and he will reign over the house of Jacob."*	Genesis 17:16-17 - Angel to Abraham about Sarah: *"I will bless her, and indeed I will give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her."*
Luke 1:37 - Angel to Mary: *"For no matter is impossible* (αδυνατος) *before God."*	Genesis 18:14 - God to Abraham about Sarah: *"Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Will I really have a child, now that I am old?'* *Is anything too wonderous for Yahweh [Heb.]?* *For no matter is impossible* (αδυντος) *for God [Sept.]."*
Luke 1:44 - Elizabeth to Mary: *"Behold, when the voice of your greeting came into my ears, the child in my womb leapt* (σκιρταω) *for joy."*	Genesis 25:22 - Rebekah" *"But the children leapt* (σκιρταω Sept.) *within her ..."*

> Mary's pregnancy both belongs to the series of famous mothers of deliverers in the Hebrew Scriptures, in that it is enabled by a miraculous act of God, but it also transcends the series, in that her pregnancy is virginal. In Elizabeth and her son the storyline of Israel's Scriptures culminates, while in Mary and her son the new creation begins. It is not surprising, therefore, that, while Mary does stand in the succession of biblical mothers who conceive through God's power, she is more especially and more emphatically portrayed by Luke as in the succession of human agents of divine deliverance from their enemies ... Mary's motherhood is celebrated as part of her active role in a great act of God for the salvation of his people. Mary's motherhood is of national and even world-changing significance.
>
> Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 58

In Luke 1:46-55, Mary's song (the Magnificat) is crucially important for introducing the core theological themes of Luke's Gospel. It has a symmetrical, mirrored design.

God brings a great reversal for Mary.
46My soul glorifies the Lord, *47and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.* *48For he has had regard for the lowliness (ταπεινωσις) of his servant (δουλος);* *for behold, from this time on all generations will count me blessed.* *49For the Mighty One (δυνατος) has done great things for me;* *and holy is his name.* *50And his covenant love (ελεος), is upon generation after generation* *toward those who fear him.*
Hinge: Mary's story is a paradigm for God's work in history.
51He has enacted power with his arm; *he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart.*
Future redemption will mirror Mary's story.
52He has brought down mighty ones (δυναστα) from their thrones, *and has exalted those who are lowly (ταπεινος).* *53He has filled the hungry with good things* *and sent away the rich empty-handed.* *54He has given help to Israel his servant (δουλος)* *in remembrance of his covenant love (ελεος).* *55As he spoke to our fathers,* *to Abraham and his seed unto the age.*

> Mary, in her "low status" (v. 48) is clearly paradigmatic of those whom God exalts. But she does not only represent them. In her own exaltation by God, from low status to being the mother of the Messiah, she becomes the means of the exaltation of the lowly in her generation through the coming of the Messiah. This is why the acts of divine "reversal" and salvation can be described in the past tense, as one single act of salvation for God's people. Mary's becoming the mother of the Messiah is the beginning of the exaltation of the lowly and the humiliation of the exalted in Israel that her son will accomplish.
>
> Richard Bauckham, *Gospel Women*, 70

Mary's song is also a creative collage of intertextual echoes from salvation songs all over the Hebrew Bible.

Mary's Song	Old Testament Intertexts
Luke 1:46-47 *My soul exalts the Lord,* *and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.*	1 Samuel 2:1 *My heart rejoices in Yahweh, my horn is raised up by Yahweh ... for I will rejoice in your salvation.* Habakkuk 3:18 *I will rejoice in Yahweh,* *I will be glad in the God of my salvation.* Psalm 35:9 *And my soul shall rejoice in the LORD;* *It shall exult in his salvation.*
Luke 1:48 *For he has looked upon the lowliness of his servant;* *for behold, from this time on all generations will count me fortunate* (μακαριζω).	1 Samuel 2:11 *O Lord of hosts, if You will indeed look on the affliction of your maidservant and remember me, and not forget your maidservant.* Genesis 30:13 *Leah said, "Fortunate* (μακαριος) *am I! For women will call me fortunate* (μακαριζω)*." So she named him fortunate [= Heb. Asher].* Psalm 72:17 [Sept.] *May his [messianic seed] name be blessed* (ευλογημενος) *forever ... may all the families of the earth be blessed* (ευλογεω) *in him, all the nations will count him fortunate* (μακαριζω).
Luke 1:49 *For the Mighty One has done great things for me; and holy is his name.*	Deuteronomy 10:20-21 *You shall fear the LORD your God ... he is your praise and he is your God, who has done these great things and awesome things for you which your eyes have seen.* Psalm 111:9 *He has sent redemption to his people, he has commanded his covenant forever, holy and awesome is his name.*
Luke 1:50 *And his mercy is upon generation after generation toward those who fear him.*	Psalm 103:17 *For Yahweh's covenant love [Sept. "mercy" =* ελεος */ Hebrew:* חסד*] is from age to age over those who fear him, and his righteousness for the children of children.*
Luke 1:51 *He has done great deeds with his arm;* *he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their heart.*	Exodus 6:1 *With my mighty hand I will send Israel out, and with my exalted arm he will bring them out of Pharaoh's land.* Isaiah 51:9 *Wake up, wake up, put on strength O arm of Yahweh, as in the days of past generations long ago.* Psalm 118:15 [Sept.] *The right arm of the Lord has done great deeds, the right arm of the Lord has exalted me.* Psalm 89:11 [Sept.] *You brought down the proud as one that is slain, and with the arm of your power, you scattered your enemies.*

Luke 1:52-53 *He has brought down rulers from their thrones,* *and has exalted those who were humble.* *He has filled the hungry with good things;* *and sent away the rich empty-handed.*	1 Samuel 2:7-8 *The Lord sends poverty and wealth; he humbles* *and he exalts.He raises the poor from the dust and* *lifts the needy from the ash heap; he seats them* *with princes and has them inherit a throne of honor.*
Luke 1:54-55 *He has given help to his servant Israel,* *in remembrance of his mercy,* *just as he spoke to our fathers,* *to Abraham and his descendants forever.*	Isaiah 41:8-9 *But you, Israel, my servant,* *Jacob, whom I have chosen,* *you descendants of Abraham my friend,* *I took you from the ends of the earth,* *from its farthest corners I called you.* *I said, "You are my servant";* *I have chosen you and have not rejected you.* Psalm 98:3 *He has remembered his covenant love and his* *faithfulness to the house of Israel;* *All the ends of the earth have seen* *the salvation of our God.* Micah 7:20 *You will be faithful to Jacob,* *and show love to Abraham,* *as you pledged on oath to our* *ancestors in days long ago.*

This usage of traditional scriptural language in a new context is not a sign of a lack of originality. Rather it is testimony to the art of the poet who can take language already laden with meaning for people familiar with the heritage of their Scriptures and use it to describe new situations.

M. Horgan, "*The Hodayot (1QH) and New Testament Poetry,*" 190

3. Mary's Faith and Zechariah's Doubt

Mary's humble faith and elevation is in contrast to the priest Zechariah's doubt and lowering of status (in becoming mute). Once he regains his ability to speak, he utters a song woven entirely out of lines from Israel's prophetic hopes.

Luke 1:68 *Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,* *for he has visited us and accomplished redemption for his people,*	Exodus 4:31 *So the people believed; and when they heard* *that the LORD has visited the sons of Israel* *and that he had seen their affliction ...* Exodus 6:6 *Say, therefore, to the sons of Israel, "I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. I will also redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments."*
Luke 1:69 *And has raised up a horn of salvation for us* *in the house of David his servant—*	Psalm 132:13, 17-18 *For the LORD has chosen Zion;* *he has desired it for his habitation.* *There I will cause the horn of David to spring forth; I have prepared a lamp for mine anointed.* *His enemies I will clothe with shame, but* *upon himself his crown shall shine.* 2 Samuel 22:3 *My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge,my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge ...* Psalm 148:13-14 *Let them praise the name of the LORD,* *for his name alone is exalted; his glory is above earth and heaven. And he has lifted up a horn for his people.*
Luke 1:70-71 *As he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old—* *Salvation from our enemies, and from* *the hand of all who hate us;*	Psalm 18:17 *He saved me from my strong enemy, and from those who hated me, for they were too mighty for me.*
Luke 1:72-73 *to show mercy toward our fathers, and to remember his holy covenant,* *the oath which he swore to Abraham our Father ...*	Micah 7:20 *You will give truth to Jacob and covenant love to Abraham,* *the oath you swore to our forefathers from the days of old.*
Luke 1:74-75 *to grant us that we, being rescued from the hand of our enemies,* *might serve him without fear,* *in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.*	Micah 4:10 *From Babylon you will be rescued; There the LORD will redeem you from the hand of your enemies.*
And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High. *For you will go on before the Lord to prepare his ways;*	Malachi 3:1 *Behold, I am going to send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to his temple ...*
To give to his people the knowledge of salvation, by the forgiveness of their sins, because of the mercy of our God	Micah 7:18 *Who is a God like you, who forgives iniquity and passes over the rebellious act of the remnant of his possession? He does not retain his anger forever, because he delights in covenant love.*

With which the sunrise from on high will visit us.	Malachi 4:2 *But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings ...*
To shine upon those who sit in darkness and the shadow of death, *to guide our feet into the way of peace.*	Isaiah 9:2 *The people who walk in darkness* *will see a great light;* *those who live in a dark land,* *the light will shine on them.*